



## **Calm Hours: a Mileven One-shot Collection** by **LiaGwriter**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Hurt-Comfort, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Mike W.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-07-28 23:28:47

**Updated:** 2019-04-22 11:25:21

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 20:37:38

**Rating:** K+

**Chapters:** 12

**Words:** 16,093

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** A series of Mileven moments, as requested by readers.

# 1. Chapter 1

*Hi everyone! I've been writing a bunch of Mileven drabbles based on prompts over on Tumblr ( writer-lia) and decided to start posting them as a collection here and on AO3. They range in length from short drabbles to more substantial one-shots. Each chapter will be one scene that corresponds to the prompt I was given. Hope you enjoy them, and please let me know what you think! :)*

**Prompts: "Kiss me" & "You need sleep"**

---

Mike had never been more grateful for silence. First, because it allowed El to slip quickly into the restful sleep she desperately needed; and second, because he was able to hear her quiet, shallow breaths. On a logical level he knew it was creepy to lay awake listening to someone breathe, but after everything that had gone on that night - the Demodogs and the tunnels and the hour of crippling anxiety waiting for her and Hopper to return from the lab - her slow inhale-exhale pattern was a constant reminder that she was really there; alive, unhurt, as far as anyone could tell. There, in his arms.

When Hopper had burst through the Byers' front door hours earlier, El limp in his arms, there'd been a frantic reaction. In the midst of the Chief's hurried attempts to assure everyone that she was okay, in her haze El had managed to utter one word, one syllable: Mike. Thinking about it again made his heart ache; the plain fact that in her barely conscious state, his was the only name she could muster, a plea not for food or water or sleep, but him. No one had said anything. And no one protested when Mike followed Hopper into Jonathan's room, hovering as he laid El down on the bed. As soon as she was in place Mike had moved to her side, taking one of her hands in both of his. The Chief had only looked at him sternly and said, "She needs to rest," before turning to leave.

At first he'd just sat there and taken in the sight of her: pale skin, remnants of hastily cleaned dried blood streaked on her cheeks and chin. Then he'd begun to nervously check her pulse, shifting a finger every few moments against the inside of her wrist. Eventually his eyes had grown heavy, the incredible exhaustion finally catching up

to him, and he'd laid down as gently as possible. The moment he was settled beside El she'd curled into him, still asleep, flinging an arm around his waist and tucking her head under his chin. That was what had jolted him into the relentless awake that he was now.

The feeling of El in his arms after so long was too important to fall asleep.

The rhythm of her breathing hitched for a moment and Mike's heart began to race. He was about to jostle her and ask what was wrong but then she groaned, and he felt her shift a little beside him. The small bedside lamp had been left on, and in its dim glow Mike glanced down to see El's eyes fluttering open. She looked up at him, and though obviously still groggy she managed a small smile that he instantly returned.

"Mike," she breathed, an echo of the way she'd said it earlier in the throes of her return - a sigh of relief, like his name was the only thing keeping her tethered to the world.

"Hey," he replied, keeping his voice low. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," she said, her brow furrowing.

"I bet."

El yawned and shimmied up so she was eye level with him. She moved onto her side and he followed suit so that they were facing each other, still close. In a slow manner indicative of her exhausted state, she reached for one of his hands and clasped it tightly, resting it between them.

"I'm sorry for falling asleep," she said then, her voice a near whisper.

Mike bristled with confusion. "What? Don't be sorry. You need it."

Her eyes met his and she held his gaze long enough to make Mike blush. "I know but, I want to talk, and be.. be awake with you," she murmured. Mike couldn't help the smile that spread quickly across his face.

"There's lots of time for that El, don't worry. Right now you need

sleep." She nodded in agreement but there was still a searching look in her eyes that Mike couldn't quite place.

"I know," she said. "But..." her voice trailed off and Mike swore he could see a blush creep onto her cheeks.

He squeezed her hand. "What is it?"

There was that look again. "Can you... will you kiss me?"

Mike's nerves jolted, caught off guard. He swallowed hard, trying to think of something to say for a few frantic moments before deciding not to spoil the moment with words. Of course he'd kiss her. So he slid his head across the pillow toward her, noticing that as soon as he came close her eyes drifted shut and it made his heart lurch for her again. Before he could lose his nerve he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers gently. The question made him shy and nervous, but kissing El didn't at all. It felt so right and normal, like they'd never been apart to begin with, like the act of it put the world on its proper axis again. Reluctantly, Mike pulled away when he found himself out of breath and he and El simply looked at each other, smiling shyly. After a moment she was the one to lean in, pressing a firm kiss to his lips one more time before curling back into his chest.

"Better now," she mumbled.

His heart soaring, Mike found himself cradling the back of her head, his fingers mindlessly playing with her hair. The motion soothed him into his own desire for sleep. There would be time to be awake together, to talk and catch up and face everything. But for now he only wanted the silence, the red-orange shadows from the lamp light, the weight of her in his arms.

"Me too," he whispered back.

## 2. Chapter 2

**Prompt: "I don't care what anyone else thinks."**

---

Seated on the back of Mike's bike, arms wrapped tightly around his middle, El couldn't help but smile. It was a glorious summer day, she was surrounded by her friends - their bikes whizzing past in a blur - and anchored to her favourite person, on the way to get some ice cream. She could practically hear the thrum of happiness coursing through her chest and she sighed, leaning her cheek against Mike's back.

She loved riding on his bike because, of course, she got to be close to him. But she loved it even more because it allowed them to talk, just the two of them. They'd always fall back from the group a little, the rushing wind shielding them so no one else could hear. Between Hopper's watchful eye and the Party's close-knit nature, they didn't get much alone time. So they'd begun to look forward to their tandem bike rides, however short: the murmured conversation, jokes and secrets shared just between one another.

El usually used the opportunity to ask Mike questions, ones she was too embarrassed to bring up around others. She knew her friends or Hopper would never laugh or make fun of her, but no one listened in the special way that Mike could. How he patiently explained everything, his voice rising when he got excited about something, his kind eyes always on hers... she felt safe with him in a way she didn't with anyone else. Which was why she thought now was a good time to ask him about something that had been on her mind for a few days.

"Mike?"

"Mm?"

"Why did those guys yell at us the other day?"

He didn't respond right away and El knew he was racking his brain for the day in question.

"You mean outside the store where Joyce works?"

"Yeah," El replied.

They'd been sitting on the sidewalk by Melvald's, waiting for Joyce to finish her shift and drive them home from the movies. El had been cuddled into Mike's side, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, when they'd heard shouting from a passing car. It was only a fleeting moment but El caught something along the lines of "Get off the sidewalk, lovebirds!" She'd heard a burst of laughter before the car sped past. Joyce had come outside before El could grasp what had happened.

"Oh that was..." Mike began, "Teasing, I guess."

El still didn't understand. "Why?"

Mike sighed. "I don't know really, it's kinda just something people do - you see people holding hands or kissing or something in public and you make a joke about it, poke fun."

El contemplated this. She never thought twice about being affectionate with Mike in public - reaching for his hand or leaning into him or resting her feet on his lap was second nature to her, his touch the thing that calmed her more than anything. But had she been embarrassing him, inviting in countless opportunities for teasing?

"Is it something people don't like to see?"

She felt Mike shrug. "Some people, I guess. Most of the time it's just harmless teasing though."

But the pit of worry in El's stomach remained. Mike always reciprocated the affection, so she was pretty sure he didn't mind it, but she suddenly felt terrible for never having bothered to consider his feelings.

"Have I... do you not like the teasing?" she asked, her voice timid.

The glow from a fluorescent pink sign ahead indicated that they'd arrived at the ice cream shop, and Mike slowed his bike to a halt. He

twisted around to face her. "Are you kidding? I could care less about those idiots from the other day, or any other wasteoids like them," he huffed.

That made El laugh and her nerves dissipated instantly, which was always the effect whenever Mike was the one reassuring her about something.

She caught his eyes then, and in a flash they darkened, his expression serious. "I don't care about teasing, I promise - I don't care what anyone else thinks. And you shouldn't either, okay?"

El nodded. "Promise."

He smiled, his eyes playful again. "Good." And with that he leaned forward, giving her a quick kiss that nearly made her lose her balance on the bike seat.

"Hey, would you two quit sucking face?" It was Dustin, shouting from a few feet ahead. "The line's getting long!"

They both laughed, exchanging a mischievous glance. Mike helped El off the seat and then pulled one of her hands into his. She took it, walking in close to his side like always.



### 3. Chapter 3

**Prompts: "You meant too much to me" & "How could you ask me that?"**

---

Anger wasn't a foreign feeling to El. She'd felt it viscerally, had used it as fuel, as motivation to protect the people she loved. But the frustration boiling in her veins right now felt different, uncomfortable, wrong - because she was angry at Mike.

She stood across from him in Jonathan's room, having woken from her deep slumber about an hour before. She'd been beyond relieved to find that Mike was still next to her, and they'd spent that time talking quietly as she eased herself into the morning. Until he told her about the tunnels.

The anger had flared up as soon as Mike had begun to describe the dark maze he'd willingly plunged into to lure the Demodogs. But she'd stayed quiet at first, because she knew it made no sense. It wasn't fair for her to be angry, she thought, when she'd left him only moments after their reunion, walking into a dangerous and uncertain fate.

But still. She had her powers. She had Hopper. She was the only one who could complete the task needed to protect her friends, to protect Mike. And he'd risked his life all throughout it, risked making El's worst fear come true: that he'd be gone when she returned, that seeing him again had been some kind of dream, and the promise of being with him would be ripped away forever. She promised him he wouldn't lose her again. And yet he'd been the one to almost get lost.

"El, please," Mike was saying now, the emotion in his voice betraying the calm he was trying to convey. He was sitting on his knees on the bed, having scrambled up to try and grab her when she'd lunged away from him in outrage. She'd frozen him in place with her mind and his eyes were still pleading with her to let him go. She couldn't look at him or her resolve would crumble. "You have to understand, El, you didn't see how the lab was crawling with those dogs, and I knew that if I could just - "

"No!" El shouted, for some reason unable to hear his justification. "You're the one who doesn't understand," she said, unable to stop her voice from shaking. "I came back because I saw you."

Mike's expression shifted to one of confusion. "What?"

El took a breath. She didn't want to yell at him. "I came back because I saw you, in the void. I knew you were in danger. And then... and then you - you almost - "

She bit back a sob, but the tears fell anyway. Imagining him in those dark tunnels was one thing, but saying out loud what could've happened was another. The outburst of emotion made her lose her grip on her powers for a moment and Mike rushed forward, ambling off the bed to just a few feet in front of her, before she realized what had happened and stopped him again. His shoulders deflated and El watched as he gulped, tears forming in his eyes.

"El, just - just listen to me," he begged. "This whole time when you were gone, I made a promise. I told myself that if you came back, that I'd do anything to keep you safe. Because I failed last time, I - I let you..." he stopped, and El couldn't help the way her heart ached as she watched him wipe tears away with his sweater sleeves. "You meant too much to me, so I promised myself I'd do anything to protect you, even though I know you can protect yourself, I just - "

"You made me promise," El blurted, cutting him off. The anger was rearing up again, the thing that hurt her most bursting forth. She could see the confusion in his eyes again so she continued. "You said you couldn't lose me again and you made me promise to come back. How could you?" She swallowed back another sob. "How could you ask me that, and then go and - and almost - "

She still couldn't go there, couldn't form the words to say how horrific the outcome might've been. She could feel her mental grip slipping again but this time she couldn't find the strength to uphold it.

And then Mike was there, gathering her in his arms, and she let herself cry, the anger morphing into what it was all along - fear. Fear of what could've been, fear that she would again be the monster, fear

that everything she loved would be taken from her.

"I'm sorry El," Mike murmured, "I'm so sorry." He pulled back and tilted her chin up, holding her gaze. "I know I made you promise... but I had to keep my own promise, too."

They looked at each other for a quiet moment, a million unsaid things passing in one another's eyes.

El sighed, suddenly exhausted again. "I'm afraid of you getting hurt," she whispered, as if to soften the blow of what those words meant.

Mike reached both hands up to cup her face and she closed her eyes, leaning into his warm touch. "I know. But it's okay now," he murmured.

They held each other then, El's anger slowly ebbing away along with the nightmarish visions of Mike in the tunnels. She knew, as she breathed him in, feeling his heartbeat against her cheek, that the fear of losing him was greater than anything. It would never leave. But she was sure then, too, that having him in her arms would always be enough to push it far, far away.

## 4. Chapter 4

**Prompt: "I fell in love with you, not them."**

---

It was too quiet. Ever since Mike had gotten his driver's license, the occasions where his dad let him borrow the car were cherished by him and El; it was a chance to be alone, to talk, to really be together, even just for a short while. A routine drive back to the cabin, like now, would normally be filled with chatter. But it wasn't.

And El thought she knew why.

She looked cautiously over at Mike as he drove: hands on the steering wheel, jaw clenched. She hadn't said anything yet but she'd already had enough of his cold shoulder. It wasn't like him at all.

"Why are you mad?"

Her voice seemed to snap him out of his brooding a little and he glanced over at her.

"Mad? I'm not mad."

El rolled her eyes. "Yes you are, Mike. Tell me why."

She saw him shake his head in exasperation, probably annoyed both that she had cut right to the chase and that she was right. That's how it was with them. El had never learned anything other than being blunt, so it meant any awkwardness or latent anger between them was always brought right to the surface.

"I'm - I don't know... when I came out and saw that guy talking to you, I just..." his voice trailed off and El could see his jaw clench again.

Ah, there it was. She was right - he was mad about that stupid interaction she'd had moments before they'd gotten in the car.

She'd been waiting in the lobby of the movie theatre for Mike to come out of the bathroom when a boy about her age had approached

her. He'd struck up a conversation that had quickly turned into him blatantly flirting with her - a term Mike had taught her after a similar thing happened at Benny's about a year ago. She'd tried to be nice, if not obviously uninterested, until Mike had come back and grabbed her hand and all but waved the guy off.

Still, she didn't know why he was angry. They'd been over this before. They'd had this fight. So what was the problem?

"Yeah, so what?" she said, turning in her seat to face him. "I didn't want to be talking to him. And you weren't there, so he didn't know at first to leave me alone."

"I know that," Mike spat, and El almost recoiled at how annoyed he sounded. "It just made me think, you know? About how... how maybe I never gave you a fair shot."

Now El was downright confused. "What? What do you mean a fair shot?"

"Think about it, El," Mike replied, "By the time you were able to really get out there and meet new people, we were already together. But what if there was someone else - "

No. She wouldn't let him go there. "Stop it," she said, her voice rising. "We've been over this Mike. I don't want anyone else. You're the only one I want to be with. Why don't you believe me?"

Mike sighed, lifting a hand from the steering wheel to run through his hair, one of his nervous habits.

"I - I do believe you, El, I just wonder sometimes if I did the right thing, if I was being selfish and took advantage of how you didn't really know - "

"How dare you," El seethed, anger now running wildly. "Don't insult me like that. You think I didn't know what I felt, what I feel now?"

She knew she'd gotten through to him, could feel the way his frustration was dissipating into worry.

"El, no, come on I'm sorry - I didn't mean to insult you, I just... try

and think about it from my perspective, okay? Neither of us know what could've happened, if you'd met more people our age before - "

"No Mike, I do know!" She was shouting now, and though she'd gotten better at keeping her powers out of emotional outbursts, they both noticed the radio on the dash flicker, the volume getting a little louder before cutting out completely.

"I do know, because I fell in love with you, not them, not anyone else. You, Mike."

The air in the car stilled. They'd only recently said 'I love you' to one another, and the words still held a certain gravity they were both getting used to.

Mike pulled onto the road toward the cabin, turning on the car's high beams. He turned to face El fully then, but she found she was still so frustrated she could hardly look at him.

Naturally, what came next was: "El, will you look at me? Please, I'm sorry."

But she shook her head. "You say you believe me, but you don't. And I don't know what it'll take for you to understand that I've only ever wanted to be with you, Mike."

Her voice rose and she knew she was on the verge of tears. She reached for the door handle, needing to get out before that could happen, but Mike grabbed her arm.

"El, wait - I do believe you, I promise, I just, sometimes I get in my own head and it's stupid and I know, but there's - "

But she was already shrugging him off, ambling out of the car, desperate to get away before she broke down.

She could hear Mike trying to open his door so she flicked the locks with her mind, the tears finally falling as she hurried away. She hated using her powers on him like that but she wanted him to know, to feel how hurt she was.

How could he not believe her?

Later, when she lay awake, restless, she'd hear the Morse code transmitter start to beep. Hopper had moved it into her room ages ago when he realized Mike had figured out how to send messages to it. She'd kneel in front of it with a pencil and paper and watch as the lights blinked, deciphering the code that could've only come from him:

*'I love you.'*

And after that: *'Only you.'*

## 5. Chapter 5

**Prompt: "What the hell were you thinking?"**

---

"What the hell were you thinking?"

"What?"

"Come on El, you know what I mean."

They'd just gotten off Mike's bike and were standing on either side of it, squaring off. They were in the parking lot of Benny's, their friends having already gone inside to claim a booth.

El crossed her arms. She didn't see what Mike was so mad about.

"No, I don't," she countered.

Mike huffed in exasperation, gesturing to the road. "Back there, just before we got here. I know you busted the tire on that guy's car!"

"They were shouting at us!"

"So?"

They'd all been biking in a fleet to Benny's, El and Mike bringing up the rear, when a car full of older kids pulled up beside them. Insults were hurled - the usual variety, about how lame they were for biking, how they should take their nerd gang somewhere else.

But then they'd said things about Mike; calling him names, making fun of his looks. It made El mad. Really mad.

Which was why when they'd finally quit it and driven ahead, she'd squinted, focusing on the car's back right tire. In a matter of seconds a loud popping noise rang out and it was flat, causing the car to skid over to the shoulder on the other side of the road.

Mike had looked back at her briefly, suspicious, and El had rushed to wipe the blood from under her nose. But she knew the instant they



got to the parking lot that she was busted.

"So what?" Mike continued, "I don't care if they were doing worse than that, El. Using your powers like that is dangerous. It might raise suspicion. Don't you get that?"

She wouldn't admit it, but El knew he was right. It was summer now, and even though it had been months since she closed the gate, El was still technically supposed to be in hiding.

This outing to Benny's, even, had been facilitated by the entire Party's incessant begging and pouting in front of Hopper.

But still. She couldn't find words to explain to Mike the overwhelming rage she'd felt as she listened to those wasteoids insult him while he biked on, trying to ignore them.

"I didn't like what they were saying to you," she murmured, letting her defiant facade slip a little.

Mike sighed. "El, I don't care what they were saying about me - it doesn't bother me, okay? And it definitely isn't worth you getting caught over."

"But it bothered *me*, Mike. It made me really mad."

His eyes searched her face and she saw a hint of recognition. They both knew that if the situation was flipped Mike would've been furious, might've even done something stupid and gotten in over his head. But he didn't have powers that could bust out a tire, or risk the wrath of inter-dimensional forces.

"I know it did, El. But you shouldn't use your powers like that because of me."

His eyes pleaded for her to agree, but she found she couldn't.

She shifted from foot to foot, looking down at the ground. "I don't know if I can promise that."

Mike sighed again, his frustration rising even further. "Why not?"

El knew why not. But could she say it? Mustering up her courage, she looked at him, standing on the other side of the bike, his eyes still patient even in his anger.

"Because... because I love you."

The words brought a wave of relief through El's body, which was quickly replaced by a knot of anxiety when she saw the incredulous look on Mike's face.

"Y-you - you love me?"

She nodded, suddenly shy, unsure of what to do with her hands, if she should hold Mike's gaze or not.

"El," he started, his voice gentle. "You know... you know what that - "

"Yes, I know what it means," she snapped back.

This was why she'd been afraid to tell him, why the words had stewed for far too long in the back of her head - because they were young, and there was still so much she had to learn, to catch up on.

But not this. This she was sure of.

She could see Mike mentally backpedaling as he shook his head.

"I - I know you know what it means, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that, I was just - "

He stopped, steadying himself, taking a breath. And then he looked at her and she could read it in his eyes before he said it.

"I love you too, El."

A second wave of relief coursed through her and she sighed, the breath leading into a smile she couldn't hold back.

"You do?" she found herself saying.

He nodded, his cheeks flushed - it was his turn to feel shy.

"Of course I do. I feel like... like I've known for so long."

"Me too."

They met eyes then, exchanging timid, knowing smiles. El's heart was beating fast, not with nerves but with exhilaration. Everything felt heightened, like the volume on life had suddenly been turned up to full and she could hear, see, touch, feel everything more acutely.

Mike reached across the bike, holding his hand out. "Should we go inside?"

El could only nod, unable to wipe the giddy smile from her face. She took his hand as they guided his bike to the side of the building, his touch sending a new kind of warmth through her veins.

When they were a few steps from the front door he pulled her in toward him, leaning down close.

"I love you," he whispered, just for her.

## 6. Chapter 6

**Prompts: "I can't sleep, can I stay here?" & "Dance with me."**

**(*\*Requested as a hurt/comfort involving Mike's parents fighting*)**

---

After everything Mike had been through in the past year, the last place he expected to feel trapped was in his own home.

But there he was, pacing back and forth in his room, unable to escape the shouting going on downstairs no matter how loud he played his radio or tried to distract himself with planning the next D&D campaign. He'd been feeling trapped a lot more lately - ever since his parents seemed to stop caring if him and his sisters heard their arguments.

Usually he was able to escape to the basement before it got bad, but not this time. And now there was no way to get down to his refuge or even leave the house without walking into the eye of the storm. Or worse, get dragged into it.

Because that had been getting worse lately too. Everything had.

*"You don't see how much it is for me, taking care of those three practically on my own!"* he heard his mom yell. He could tell she'd been crying.

*"Those three"?* Like he and Nancy and Holly were some kind of burden? He heard his dad groan in frustration before shouting back something along the lines of, *"Are we going to go over this another goddamn time?"*

Mike stopped his pacing, feeling a strange kind of anger settle over him. This had been going on for over an hour and there were no signs of it letting up. He hadn't really had to consider how bad it was getting because his strategy was always to just get away from it, both physically and mentally.

The only person he ever talked to about it was El, and that was because she never asked questions or gave advice or badgered him to

do something about it. She just listened. Held him and listened.

He sat down on his bed, and it wasn't until he lowered his head into his hands that he realized he was crying. It was as though all the times he'd held back or tried to numb himself to the reality of it came washing over him in that moment and he fell forward more, elbows on his knees, and sobbed.

Because it wasn't fair that they stopped caring if he heard them. It wasn't fair that they made him feel trapped in his own house. It wasn't fair that they said things that made him feel like somehow part of it was his fault.

After a few minutes he let up, his head beginning to ache. He glanced over to his bedside table, where his Supercomm sat. Looking at it, he knew there was only one sound that would be able to truly drown everything out, no matter how loud they got.

El's voice.

He reached for the device, hesitating for a moment as he fiddled with the dials. Some part of him felt guilty for calling her in a moment of weakness, afraid of being a burden to her, too. But before he could decide against it he was radioing their secret channel, silently pleading her to pick up. There was a telltale crackle in the static, and then came the sound he longed for.

"Mike?"

He let out a breath of relief.

"El?"

"What's wrong?"

She knew. Of course she knew. It was late, after all - but he knew his voice had given everything away.

"I - they're - they're fighting again, El, and I thought I could put up with it but I'm up in my room and it's been an hour now and I can't - I can't stand to hear - "

"Hold on," she said suddenly. "Don't hang up. Give me a minute."

Mike bristled with confusion - it didn't sound like she'd gotten interrupted or anything. But before he could contemplate it further she was back on.

"Jonathan's going to drive me," she said, sounding a little out of breath.

"Jonathan?"

"Yeah. Hopper's working an overnight shift so I'm staying at Will's. But Jonathan said he'd give me a ride to your place."

"What? El, no, it's okay, you don't have to come here I just wanted - "

"Stay where you are. I'll come up to your room."

"El, wait, there's no way you can get in here like that trust me I've - "

But the static cut him off, that telltale clicking noise indicating she was off the channel. She'd hung up on him. He sat frozen, still holding the Supercomm in its talking position. There was no arguing with El when she made up her mind about something, he knew that. But still, he wasn't sure if her coming to see him was the best idea. He wasn't sure if he wanted her to see him like this.

But there wasn't much he could do about it, because about fifteen minutes later she was there, crouching outside his window, tapping gently on the panes. He let her in quickly, helping pull her all the way inside. She was dressed in loose grey shorts and a large long-sleeved shirt. Her pyjamas.

His call had woken her up.

"El, Jesus, you didn't have to get out of bed and come - "

But she wasn't having it. She held a finger to his lips for a moment and then she was grasping at his shirt, pulling him close to her, wrapping her arms around him.

"Yes I did, Mike," she whispered, her face buried in his neck.

He wanted to protest, to apologize for waking her. But instead he found himself closing his eyes, focusing on nothing but her touch, her warmth.

The anger, the confusion, the fear... it all ebbed away slowly as he held her, felt her hands graze through his hair, rub his back gently.

"How'd you even get up here, anyway?" he asked after a while, kissing the top of her head.

"Oh, I kind of climbed, and, well..." she leaned back, motioning to a spot of dried blood under her nose. "That too."

Mike laughed, shaking his head.

El smiled. "So tell me what - "

But she was cut off by a sudden burst of shouting. There was a thud, followed by the sound of something smashing to the floor.

"See?" It was Ted, bellowing now, infuriated. *"You see what happens when you do this?"*

Mike felt El wince and he turned to her. She must have read the look of desperation on his face because her expression shifted from fear to one of blatant determination.

"Let's go," she said, unravelling from their embrace.

"Go where?" Mike asked. "I don't know if - "

"The cabin," El replied. She was already slipping her shoes back on. "Hopper's not there."

"But how - "

"Your bike," she said, filling in the blanks. When she saw the uncertain look on his face she grinned mischievously, holding a hand up. "Don't worry. I can make the ride go a little faster," she said, wiggling her fingers.

Mike gave his room a once over. He was done feeling trapped.

Grabbing a hoodie off the back of his chair, he followed El out the window.

---

Mike felt like he was flying. His feet were resting on his bike pedals, the wheels turning rapidly of their own volition thanks to El. They whizzed through the night, and he drank in the feeling of the cool August air whipping against his skin. He felt like a heavy block had been lifted from his chest.

He felt free.

By the time they got to the cabin he'd all but shaken off the awful feelings from earlier, his parents' shouting a now distant echo. He was still giddy as they walked inside and he scooped El up in his arms, peppering kisses all over her face. She laughed, trying to steady herself as his lips chased her: forehead, cheeks, nose.

"I love you so much," he muttered against her skin.

She sighed, still laughing a little. Gently, she reached her hands up to his face, holding him in place so that he'd look at her straight on.

"I love you too," she said. "And I could... I could hear that you really needed me this time."

Mike swallowed hard. So that's why she'd sounded so frantic, had insisted on coming over.

"I just... I hate how they don't even care anymore," he managed, feeling a lump rising in his throat. He was surprised at how quickly the heavy feeling rushed back in and he gulped, tears pricking the corner of his eyes.

El started to rub his back again. "We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Mike shook his head. "No, I do. I think I should."

And so they walked over to the couch, lying down face to face, El drawing soothing circles in Mike's palms as he told her everything.



How he felt like he was at fault, and how confusing that was. How he was scared of being a burden. How it made him angry and distant and fuelled a desire to just shut down. How he hated pushing it away but didn't know what else to do.

Like always, El just listened - and like always, it was exactly what Mike needed.

It was her eyes that made him feel the most heard; how they shadowed the emotions in his own, reflecting back to him what he found hard to see in himself. In them he always saw hope, could always believe that everything would be better - that the pain was temporary.

When he finally finished he felt drained, like both the sadness and elation from earlier had coalesced and then left him all at once, leaving a gap that could only be filled by a restful sleep.

"El, I don't - I can't go back there to sleep, not right now anyway. Can... can I stay here?"

"Of course. I wasn't going to let you go anyway," she said, smiling.

Mike was about to settle in and let the exhaustion take over when she spoke again.

"But before we sleep I wanted to..." she trailed off and her brow furrowed as she contemplated how to phrase what she wanted. She looked up at him, studying his face carefully. "When was the last time you felt really happy?"

Mike frowned and she took it as a cue to continue. "I mean not just normal happy - a happiness where you felt totally free, like you could do anything... like there was nothing bad in the world at all."

"Geez El, that's a big question."

"Just think about it," she pleaded. "What were you doing?"

Mike exhaled, doing as she asked. Scenes from the past couple of months flashed through his mind at first - his first summer with El had certainly been memorable so far, undoubtedly some of the

happiest times of his life. But his mind settled on a moment he knew fit exactly what she was talking about; where he felt invincible. Where nothing hurt and nothing ever could.

"The Snowball," he told her, "When you came in and... and then we danced together."

He blushed, unsure why he felt suddenly shy. Talking about the memory made him feel alive with it all over again: the way his heart had stopped when she walked into the gym, the way he'd been so unsure if he should kiss her but then unable to help it.

"Get up," El said suddenly, nudging him with the hand that had been resting on his chest.

It was a little more forceful than Mike was expecting and he nearly fell off the couch, bracing himself before standing all the way up.

El did too, brushing past him. He watched as she walked over to Hopper's record player and began fiddling with it.

"What are you doing?" he asked, even though it was kind of self evident.

She didn't reply, still at work. A few moments later, an old slow song Mike didn't recognize began to play. The record player was old, the audio a little scratchy, but it was still decent enough. El turned back to him, and he recognized the sly smile he'd become used to seeing over the past few months. But there was something else there too - shyness, maybe.

She walked over to where he was standing and grabbed both his hands, setting them on her waist, a mimic of what he'd done at the Snowball when he'd placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Dance with me," she said quietly, a timid plea rather than a demand.

Not trusting how his voice would sound right then, Mike responded by pulling her in closer, and she snaked her arms around his neck like it was second nature. They swayed back and forth, keeping their eyes on each other, the music wafting slowly through the speakers.

Just like when she'd come through his window and into his arms, Mike found he could focus only on El, the soft look in her eyes, the way her fingers played mindlessly with the curls at the base of his neck. He felt happy, of course, but more powerful than anything was a sense of calm - like her presence blurred every bad thing until it was out of sight forever. And then her eyes were drifting shut and she was coming closer and pressing her lips against his, warm and soft and everything Mike dreamed about.

It was longer than usual, and when they parted a moment later she kissed him again, her lips lingering, making him feel dizzy. She pulled back eventually, breathless, and instead of resting her forehead against his she placed her cheek against his collarbone, pulling him even closer.

God, there was no bliss like having El in his arms.

"I wanted you to feel it again," she said after a while.

Mike thought he knew what she meant but he wasn't entirely sure. "Hmm?"

"At the Snowball, the last time you felt really happy... I wanted you to feel that again. Or maybe something like it."

Mike's heart ached. He'd pieced that together when she asked him to dance but hearing her explain her reasoning was another thing. He moved his fingers through her hair, guiding her head back gently so she could meet his eyes.

"El, I - I don't know how to.." he swallowed hard, willing the tears he could feel brimming to stay at bay. "I - god, I love you so much. You know that, right?"

She nodded, her hands moving to cup his face.

"And I'd do anything for you, if you were ever feeling something like - like what I was, you know I'd do - "

She moved a finger to his lips, an echo of when she'd done it in his room earlier.

"I know Mike. It's okay. I know."

And then she nudged him down a little so their foreheads were resting together and they continued to sway, Mike relishing in the return of that calm only El could bring.

## 7. Chapter 7

**Prompts: "All I wanted was for you to be happy" & "Don't lie to me."**

---

El looked down at the dark water, her heart hammering in her chest.

She thought for what was probably the fiftieth time about turning around and climbing back down, but something kept her in place, her toes curling over the edge of the rocks. She'd wanted to do this. She'd insisted.

Besides, she thought, it wasn't such a big deal anyway. She knew how to swim - Mike had been teaching her for the past six weeks and she was good at it now, confident enough to tread water and join her friends when they played games in the deeper part of the quarry. They'd all jumped from this spot before; a small cliff jutting out next to the rocky beach where they'd laid their towels out. She'd watched each member of the Party leap from it and emerge just fine, laughing and whooping as they came up for air.

But actually being up there felt different. El looked to where her friends were waiting, anxious expressions on their faces. They'd all been hesitant when she said she wanted to try the jump, but none more than Mike. He had all but dragged her away from it, insisting that she didn't have to and that it wasn't that fun anyways. That she could do it another time. But she'd shaken him off, giving him a steely glare she hoped would convey what she was too nervous to say out loud: *Just let me be normal for once.*

So she'd climbed up there, ignoring the worried whispers behind her. Just then she caught Mike's eyes, which was a huge mistake; the sheer panic in them was enough to make her want to scramble away from the edge in a split second. But she took a deep breath, forcing herself to turn away. She could do it. It wasn't a big deal. She braced herself and then she heard Mike's voice, high and strained. "El, I think it's better if - "

But she didn't hear the last part because she'd pushed off the edge

and was finally soaring down into the water.

The impact reminded her that it wasn't very high after all - she hit the surface with a decent splash and was back up above it in no time, air returning to her lungs. She could hear faint cheering from the shore, Dustin's voice calling out: "Atta girl, El!"

She smiled, laughing to herself. She'd *finally* done it. She began to swim away from the landing spot, kicking her left leg out to propel forward, when she felt her heel collide with solid rock.

"Ow! Shit!"

She must've yelled it pretty loudly because a second later she heard Mike shout back, "Are you okay!?"

It was just a bump, but for some reason it sent El off into a panic. She whipped around, realizing she still had a decent way to swim until she was back on shore. Her limbs began to feel heavy as her anxiety rose, making treading water difficult. She tried to calm herself down, taking deep breaths, thinking about Mike's patient instructions: 'Just stay moving, keep moving.' But she was losing control, feeling herself start to sink, like she was wearing heavy clothes and the water was dragging her down. She looked frantically to the shore, and in her panicked state her vision tunnelled, her friends appearing as though they were miles away.

And then her head went under.

It couldn't have been long at all, but it felt like ages passed before she felt herself being yanked to the surface. She blinked water out of her eyes, gasping wildly.

"It's okay, El, I've got you."

It was Lucas - undoubtedly the fastest, strongest swimmer in the Party.

El coughed and sputtered as he pulled her to safety, her breathing slowly returning to normal as she felt the water getting shallower. She'd barely found her footing on the shore before Mike was there, pulling her up and into his arms.

"What happened?" he said frantically, pulling back so he could check if she was hurt. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I - I'm fine, I banged my foot and I just - I got scared, I don't know..."

Mike grabbed the towel at his feet and wrapped it around her shoulders. They stood there for a moment, El's shaky breaths echoing into the silence.

"Want me to take you home?" he murmured, wrapping the towel tighter around her.

She didn't, not really. She wanted to stay and forget about it and have fun with the rest of the Party, maybe even go in the water again when she was feeling better. But she was embarrassed and upset and she couldn't bear to see everyone staring at her with those worried looks.

So she just nodded, Mike already guiding her away. He must've exchanged knowing looks with the rest of the Party because no one said anything to El as they passed.

---

They made their way back to the cabin using the train tracks, Mike guiding his bike along, El walking opposite him.

She hadn't spoken since they left the quarry and she could sense that it was starting to bother him. More than once he let out a strange sigh, as though he'd thought of something to say but decided against it at the last minute. Eventually, when it was hindering on unbearable, he broke the silence.

"Why'd you do it, El?" he asked, his voice gentle, timid. "Why'd you jump if you were scared?"

She bristled, for some reason annoyed by the question. "Did I say I was scared?"

She wasn't looking at him but she could sense the shift in his demeanour.

"Well, no, you didn't, but I mean I was surprised that you wanted to -

"

"What's so surprising? I know how to swim," El spat, anger rising in her throat.

Mike stopped his bike and turned to her. She wanted more than anything to just keep walking, to ignore whatever he was getting at. But he reached for her arm, his touch gentle and reassuring, and she knew she couldn't hide from him.

"El, come on. You know that's not what I meant. Why'd you do it?"

She still couldn't look at him. "Because I just wanted to. What's so wrong with that?"

"Nothing is wrong with it. But you've told me before how afraid you were of jumping and then today all of a sudden you - "

"So I changed my mind. Is that not allowed?"

Mike sighed. He moved his bike out of the way, walking around to where El was standing before setting it on the ground. She couldn't avoid his gaze now and he held her eyes, his expression serious.

"Friends don't lie El," he said, knowing it was the one phrase that always got through to her. "So don't lie to me."

"Mike..." she started. Her resolve was crumbling, and she shook her head.

"I - I just wanted to do it, okay? I wanted to feel like Max and Will and Dustin and Lucas and you for a second and... and not be afraid." She could tell Mike was surprised by her response and she took his being at a loss for words as an opportunity to explain herself. "I'm tired of - of being scared to do things, normal things."

"I understand that, El, but you didn't have to do the jump to feel like that. You know I would've stayed down with you if - "

"But that's exactly the point!" she shouted, almost startling herself at how angry she sounded.



"I didn't want you to stay back with me like you always do, or not jump just so I wouldn't feel left out." She could see he was about to say something but she charged on, too upset to care. "I know you say it doesn't bother you but I saw how much fun you were having today, and I didn't want to be the reason that had to stop."

She was crying now, hating that she couldn't help it. Mike stepped forward, intent on pulling her into his arms, but she shrunk away. She didn't want to be lulled into the comfort of his touch until she'd finished getting this off her chest.

"All I wanted was for you to be happy, Mike, and not have to... to hold back, because of me. And I just - I just wanted it to all be *normal*, for once." At that a sob escaped her throat and she felt her knees go weak. She didn't realize she'd stumbled until Mike caught her.

"Hey, hey it's okay, it's okay," he murmured, cradling her head against his chest as she began to cry harder. El's breaths hitched as she tried to quell the sobs that racked her body. She focused on the sound of Mike's heartbeat against her ear, his arms wrapped so tightly around her.

It was Mike's arms that had pulled her onto the shore. That had guided her away from the quarry, toward home. That could make right the fear and sadness quarrelling inside her.

"You know what makes me happy, El?" he said after a while. She lifted her head to look at him. "Being with you. We don't even have to be doing anything. I just - after being away from you for so long... I just like being around you. Having you there."

Her heart clenched painfully as she watched tears start to brim in his eyes. "And what happened today... I don't want you to think you have to do stuff like that for me, okay? Or for anyone." He sighed, and El watched an array of emotions pass over his face. "You're not holding me back. As long as you're there... that's all I need to be happy."

El smiled, feeling calm for the first time in what felt like hours. How did he always know *exactly* what to say?

"I love you, Mike," she whispered, still getting used to how those words felt.

She watched him blush furiously and it made her smile even bigger. "I love you too," he replied. "Now will you promise me you won't go jumping off cliffs again anytime soon?"

El laughed. "Promise."

Mike pulled her into his side and they walked over to his bike, hauling it upright before heading on to the cabin. He leaned down and kissed her temple, smiling as he did so.

"Good."

## 8. Chapter 8

**Prompts: "Shouldn't you be with him/her?" & "Nothing is wrong with you."**

***(\*Requested as a jealousy fight)***

---

"El, will you open the door? Please?"

The standoff had only been going on for about five minutes, but El could hear the sheer desperation in Mike's voice. She knew if she focused on it for too long it would weaken her resolve, so she closed her eyes and pictured the girl's face again. The girl Mike had been talking to at the bike rack after school. The girl that had smiled at him and touched his arm as she laughed. She opened her eyes, a fresh bout of anger taking hold.

"Shouldn't you be with *her*?" she said, loud enough so he could hear.

There was a pause. "What? Be with who?"

She bit her lip, realizing that she'd practically just admitted to spying on him. Crap. Now she was going to have some explaining to do.

She'd only done it because she was excited to see him, having looked forward to this planned after-school visit all week long. The hours had passed at an agonizing pace, El moping about the cabin, trying to distract herself to no avail. When 3:15 finally arrived, the anticipation reached a fever pitch and she decided to use the void to check up on Mike's progress. It was a long bike ride from school to the cabin, after all, so if she could see where he was at least she'd know when to expect him. But when she found him, he'd been talking to a girl El didn't recognize, with long, dark hair that she felt instantly jealous of.

She hadn't stayed in the void for too long. A few moments had been all she needed to feel sick to her stomach, coming back out into reality with tears already streaming down her cheeks. Mike spoke again, his voice jarring her from her thoughts.

"El, can you please just tell me what's going on?"

She sighed, staring at the closed door. She could picture him leaning against the other side, pressing his ear to the wood to listen for signs of movement. As much as she wanted to crawl under the covers, pull them over her head, and wait for Mike to leave, she knew he wouldn't go away that easily. She'd have to face him eventually.

She huffed, using the anger still boiling in her veins as motivation to get up from the bed and walk to the door, flinging it open with more force than she intended. And just like she'd envisioned, there he was: one hand still cupped around his ear, the other poised as though he were about to knock again. The door bursting open had clearly startled him and he flinched, stepping back a little. El could see that any semblance of relief that had come with her finally opening the door vanished when he saw the look on her face.

"What's going on?"

"I saw you talking to... to that girl."

Mike frowned, searching El's face in a panic. "Saw me? What do you mean you..." he trailed off, realization slowly dawning on him. "The void," he said, his tone cautious. "Why were you - "

"I just wanted to see how far away you were," El cut in, rushing to explain as she felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. "And then you were - you made her laugh, and she - "

"Where, at the bike rack? That was just some girl from my science class, El, I don't even know her name! She came up to me asking if she could borrow my notes to catch up on something and I told her my hand writing was garbage and she - I dunno, she thought that was funny, I guess, but I don't - "

"She was pretty."

El knew it was a silly thing to say, really, but the truth always seemed to come tumbling out around Mike, even when she least wanted it to. Because that was, deep down, the truth; what had stung the most was not Mike talking to the girl, but the way she looked.

Pretty in a way that felt much too far away from what El saw when she looked in the mirror. Pretty in a way she wondered if she ever would be.

Timid, El watched as Mike's eyes softened, as he began to realize what all of it was really about.

"Was she?" he asked. "I didn't notice."

El rolled her eyes, a habit she'd picked up from both Lucas and Dustin, much to Hopper's chagrin.

"Mike, friends don't - "

"I'm not lying!" he interjected, stepping forward to close some of the space between them. "I didn't notice, because I was too anxious to get out of there. I was trying my best to end the conversation as soon as possible. I couldn't wait to get here... I couldn't wait to see you."

He must've sensed El softening because he shuffled forward a little more and reached for her hand. She let him take it, complying in spite of herself.

His touch set something off in her and suddenly the sharp edges of anger gave way. She looked down at the floor, too ashamed of her next words to meet Mike's eyes. "It's just... I see Max, and Nancy, and - and now her, and it makes me feel like - " she inhaled, trying to stay calm as her voice began to quiver. "It's like there's something wrong - "

"El," Mike cut in, squeezing her hand. "Will you look at me?" She did, reluctantly, and his small but triumphant smile was enough to make her melt.

"Nothing is wrong with you. I don't want you to ever think that, okay?"

She wanted to nod, to promise him, but it wouldn't be honest to do so. Instead she gazed up at him, letting herself get lost in his dark, gentle eyes. There was one thing she could say that would be the truth.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Mike shook his head. "Don't be. I - I should've told her to get lost way sooner, I tried to - "

"No Mike, it's not your fault. I was being stupid, I shouldn't have - "

But her words were cut off by his lips, pressed against hers in earnest. She couldn't help her surprise - it was unlike him to be so forward; usually their kisses were slow to start, Mike sometimes asking her if it was okay or tugging her in close to him in a silent gesture for permission. Before she could relax into it, though, it was over, Mike pulling away and blinking his eyes open, looking nervous.

"I - I'm sorry, that was, um, I guess I just wanted - "

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"It's okay."

They both laughed then.

"I just don't know how to make you see it, El... how amazing you are. And beautiful. And smart, too, and - and not to mention you're basically a superhero, because you can do the most cool, badass stuff but also be so brave and caring and - "

It was her turn to interrupt him with her lips and she did just that, leaning up and wrapping her arms around his neck. Mike laughed a little against her mouth but after a moment he adjusted, kissing her back in a way that made her lightheaded. When they stopped they both smiled at each other, lingering in the moment.

"I'm sorry I locked you out," El said.

"It's okay," Mike replied. "Will you just promise me one thing for next time?"

"Anything."

He reached up, brushing some of the curls away from her face, his thumb gently stroking her cheek. "Remember that you're the only one I want to be with."

Already racing from their kiss, El's heartbeat picked up even more as she saw the gravity of Mike's words reflected in his eyes.

"I will," she said quietly. "I promise."

He wrapped his arms all the way around her then, hugging her close.

"And just so you know," El said, running her hands up and down his back, "I don't mind if you interrupt me like that again." She blushed at her own words, grateful her face was hidden from view.

Mike laughed and she relished in the sound, in the feeling of him close to her.

"Sounds like a deal."

## 9. Chapter 9

**Prompts: "Don't be scared, I'm right here" & "Don't cry"**

---

It was going on hour twelve since El had closed the gate, and the exhaustion was finally creeping up on Mike.

He was in the passenger seat of Hopper's Blazer, fighting to stay awake as they headed toward the cabin. El was sprawled out in the backseat, having been asleep since the ride began. After everyone had either woken up or left the Byers' house, Hopper announced he was going to bring El home to shower and change clothes. But he'd taken just a few steps to the front door before realizing that she wasn't following him - and then he'd turned to see her standing next to Mike, arms crossed, a defiant look on her face.

"Mike's coming with us," she'd told him, her voice low and cold.

Hopper had tried to argue as gently as possible, insisting that Mike needed to go home and rest, too, but El simply glared back, daring him in a battle he knew he couldn't win. Mike had watched the whole thing in half awe, half embarrassment. He didn't want to leave El by any means, but Hopper's exasperation made him a little uncomfortable. He turned in his seat then, craning his neck to look at her. She was peacefully asleep; hands tucked under her cheek, knees pulled up to her chest. Looking at her made any tension evaporate. Embarrassing showdown with Hopper or not, there was no way he was ready to leave her side. Not in the slightest.

He felt his eyelids drooping a little and he subconsciously leaned back against the headrest.

"Tired, kid?"

Hopper's gruff voice startled him and he lurched forward, shaking his head.

"N-no, just um, you know..." Mike started, the lie falling flat. He couldn't even pretend: he was exhausted.



He'd barely slept in the past few days, and last night was no exception. He'd drifted for a couple of hours next to El, but mostly he'd been either too worried about her, or too nervous to shift with her in his arms and wake her up. They turned down the forested road toward the cabin, the Blazer jostling over the uneven terrain. Mike heard a groan from the backseat and he glanced back to see El squinting and rubbing her eyes.

"Home?" she grumbled, sitting up a little.

"Just about," Hopper replied.

A few minutes later they pulled up to the cabin, El sighing in relief at the sight. They walked inside, the late afternoon sun casting slanting shadows across the small living room. After grabbing a change of clothes, El went straight to the bathroom. Hopper began to tidy up, returning the furniture that had been moved by Joyce, Nancy and Jonathan back to its correct spot. Mike tried to help, but every few seconds he was overtaken by either a yawn or a need to rub his eyes.

After a while Hopper looked at him, placing his hands on his hips. "Kid, why don't you get some rest? There's a cot over in the corner by the kitchen."

"No, no it's alright, I'm fine, I can - "

"Mike," Hopper interrupted. "You look like hell. Just lie down for a little bit - she might be a while," he said, jerking his head toward the bathroom, where Mike could hear the shower running.

He was too exhausted to think of a rebuttal so he obeyed, shuffling over to the aforementioned cot and collapsing onto it.

Hopper walked to the front door. "I'm going to check those trip wires," he said before disappearing out onto the porch.

It was the last thing Mike heard before he fell immediately into a deep sleep.

---

*"El? Where are you? El?!"*

*She was gone.*

*There was darkness everywhere Mike turned - a never-ending black void he'd watched her disappear into. She'd been gripping his hand just seconds ago, begging him to hold on, but an invisible force had wrenched them apart and before he had time to react, her fingers were slipping through his. Now he shouted for her, whipping around desperately in the dark, chest heaving painfully, his skin prickling with fear.*

*From somewhere in the void came a voice, so distant Mike couldn't make out what it was saying. He ran toward it, recognizing it as El's the closer he got.*

*"Mike? Mike, I'm here," she called, and he kept running, panicking now, his legs heavy and slow. Her voice grew louder and louder until Mike found himself being suddenly lifted from the void, sucked away from the never ending blackness until -*

*"Mike, wake up - I'm here, Mike, come on."*

His eyes flew open, the feeling of El's hands on his shoulders the only thing grounding him to reality. He swallowed, trying to calm his racing heart. He could feel sweat trickling down his back as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"I think you were having a nightmare," El said quietly. She was sitting on the edge of the cot, dressed in a flannel shirt and sweatpants, her hair damp.

Mike sat up and ran a hand through his hair. He sighed. "I - I was... you were gone. It was all dark and I felt your hand slip away, and - " his throat caught and he stopped.

"I heard you calling for me," El said, her expression worried, sad.

Despite his residual fear Mike felt himself blush. He must've been shouting her name out loud the way he had in the dream. "I'm sorry if I scared you, El, I just..." but again he found he couldn't go on, his voice tightening against an onslaught of anxious tears.

"It's okay," El replied. She reached for one of his hands and then she was nudging him, climbing onto the cot to lie next to him as he

settled back down.

In seconds they fell into the same position they'd slept in the night before; El curled into Mike's side, his arms wrapped around her, her head resting on his chest. The weight of her against him helped to slowly erase the last of the nightmare. But still, Mike felt like if he didn't explain at least some of it out loud, it would eat away at him, stay latent in his mind and then come up to frighten him when he was least expecting it.

"You were gone, El. You told me to hold on, and - and I tried but then..." Mike swallowed hard, the next words coming out in a near whisper. "I was so scared."

El placed a hand over his heart, undoubtedly feeling its erratic pace. "Don't be scared," she murmured. "I'm right here."

Her words were like a salve and Mike closed his eyes, causing the tears he'd been fighting to finally fall. "El, I..." he began, unsure. "I don't know what I'll do if you - if you're ever gone again, I don't think I'll be able to -"

But he couldn't go on, because those were the words he couldn't stand to say out loud. He'd told her he couldn't lose her again, but repeating it right then felt too sharp, made worse by the nightmare in which his biggest fear was suddenly a reality.

El looked up at him, her face falling when she saw his expression. Gently, she moved her hands to his forehead, brushing the hair away, stroking his cheek like he'd done when he kissed her the night before.

"Don't cry, it's okay," she said, using one arm to pull him closer. "I'm here. I'm here and I promise I won't leave."

Mike could only nod, her touch easing the fear that had sprung up again at the thought of her being taken from him.

She moved up a little higher, brushing her lips across his cheek, muttering "I'm right here," against his skin.

She repeated it until they were both too tired to speak anymore.

Eventually Mike drifted to sleep again, El's words leaving a soft echo in his mind that lulled him into the peaceful rest he so desperately needed.

When Hopper came back in and saw that El wasn't in her room, he panicked for a moment until his eyes rested on the cot. Seeing her and Mike fast asleep like that didn't even make him flinch. He felt relieved, because he knew. He knew that it was what both of them needed more than anything - each other.

## 10. Chapter 10

**Prompts: "It's cold, you should take my jacket" & "Tell me what's wrong"**

---

"It's cold, you should take my jacket."

Mike began sliding out of his large tan coat, glancing sideways at El. They were walking in the woods near the cabin, to a spot they'd found earlier in the summer where a small ridge and sparse trees made it ideal for watching the sun set.

Mike knew that cold wasn't exactly a fair statement - it was still August, after all. But the late evening air had that soon-to-be-Autumn bite, and compared to the sweltering summer Hawkins had seen thus far, it felt chilly. When El hadn't responded after nearly a minute he nudged her with his elbow.

"El? Here, take my jacket," he said, deciding to just give it to her rather than repeat the question.

She looked at him quickly and Mike could tell he'd stirred her from being lost in thought. "I'm already wearing a jacket," she mumbled back.

She was wearing one of Hopper's flannel shirts. Frowning, he gestured to it. "That's not a jacket."

"It fits like one," she retorted.

Mike flinched a little at the angry tinge in her voice. Why was she being short with him? He decided to play it off, placing the coat around her shoulders as they walked on. "Well, even if you're not cold, I think it matches your outfit," he joked, smiling at her.

But she shrugged him away, pushing it off and back into Mike's hands. "I don't want it," she snapped.

Mike stopped then, turning to her in disbelief. "What's going on, El?"

They'd had disagreements in the past, but El usually wasn't shy to say how she felt, so they always talked things through. She'd never given him the silent treatment, and he couldn't think of anything he'd done to upset her.

"Nothing," she muttered, continuing to walk ahead. She didn't get very far before realizing Mike wasn't following her. He crossed his arms, quirking an eyebrow when she looked back at him expectantly. He wasn't going anywhere until they talked this out.

"I call bull," he said. "Something's up."

El sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'm just tired."

Mike shook his head, walking forward to close some of the space between them. "If you were tired you wouldn't have wanted to go on a walk."

"Mike - "

"Tell me what's wrong, El," he interrupted. His eyes searched her face and he caught her gaze before adding, "Please?"

El looked down, her brow furrowing in thought. "I don't know, I just... I feel sad today."

Her words shifted the air a little, moving the energy from tense to something else Mike couldn't yet grasp.

"Did something happen?" he asked, moving closer to her.

She shook her head. "I don't know how to explain it. I just feel sad sometimes, and I don't know why. Or I think I do, but..." she shut her eyes then, as if she were willing away a bad thought.

Mike thought back to their day together. It had rained most of the afternoon, so they shifted their usual summer activities inside and had ended up watching a movie. El had been quiet during it, but it wasn't exactly an exciting movie, so Mike didn't think much of it. If she'd seemed gloomy at all he'd assumed it was because of the weather, which was why he'd been the one to suggest a walk to the sunset spot when the skies finally cleared.

"Okay," he said in response, his tone cautious. "How many times have you felt like this before?"

"Not that many," El said, still looking down. "It kind of just... happens. I'll see something, or hear something that reminds me of - of Papa. And the lab. And... everything."

She finally glanced up at Mike and his heart lurched when he saw that her eyes were full of tears. "And then I start to think about it, and then I feel..." she raised a hand and placed it over her heart, her fingers clutching the fabric of her shirt. "Dark. Inside."

Mike felt his jaw start to quiver, and on instinct he reached for her. "Hey, come here," he said, and though he could sense some reticence, she let herself be pulled into his arms. He rubbed her back, resting his chin on the top of her head. "It's okay to be sad sometimes."

El didn't reply and although Mike felt a little better now that he was holding her, he couldn't shake the awful sensation of helplessness. "What do you usually do when you feel like this?" he asked.

He felt her shrug. "Just wait. It always goes away, after a while," she murmured against his chest.

Mike's heart lurched painfully again at the resignation in her voice. After everything El had been through in her short life, it made more than enough sense that she'd feel irreparably sad sometimes. In fact, her triumph over it all - the fact that she wasn't constantly swallowed in the despair of the things that had happened to her - was remarkable enough alone. But still. Knowing she was hurting made Mike desperate to want to fix it.

"What if we went back to the cabin and made more Eggos?" he blurted, pulling back and gently tilting El's face up so she could look at him.

He couldn't read her expression, so he racked his brain for something to say, something to make her smile. "Or we could ask Hopper if we can build a fire, and have s'mores again?"

But she still said nothing, her eyes skirting away from his now. "Or,

we could see if some of your favourite shows are on," Mike continued, "I swear I'll watch an episode all the way through without commenting on the acting skills. Or how unrealistic the storyline is. I won't even - "

"Mike," El said calmly, tightening her arms around his waist. "Will you... will you just hold me?"

Mike gulped, his throat tightening at her words, tears pricking his eyes. It was the simplicity of it; the fact that all she wanted was exactly what he had right then - the safety and comfort of his arms. So instead of responding he gave her what she asked for; pulling her back in close, cradling her head against his heart. He could feel her exhale against him and it made him breathe a relieved sigh of his own.

Maybe he couldn't fix her sadness. But he could give her this.

Mike didn't know how long they stayed like that, enmeshed with one another. They never made it to the sunset spot. The light faded as they stood there, the orange and yellow hues melting down into the trees, the moon peeking out from behind a passing cloud. When they finally turned around to go back to the cabin, the August night had grown even cooler.

Cool enough that El finally took his jacket.



## 11. Chapter 11

**Prompts: "You could have warned me!" & "I can't imagine this world without you"**

***(\*Requested as a scenario where El goes to the lab without telling Mike)***

---

El had just jumped down from the last bit of fence when a pair of headlights washed over the dark woods surrounding her. She held up a hand to shield her eyes, panic beginning to set in. The lights inched closer and instinctively she crouched down, huddling against the fence wire.

She'd been caught.

She glanced around frantically, heart hammering wildly in her chest. Just as she was deciding which way to run, a familiar voice called out from behind the beams.

"Kid, you have about five seconds to get in this car."

Hopper.

El exhaled slowly, placing a hand to her chest. Even though she knew she wasn't technically out of trouble, she was still relieved. She walked toward the headlights, steeling herself for what she knew would be a furious Hopper. And he had every right to be.

Weeks ago when she tried to casually bring up visiting the lab, he'd balked. In the midst of their heated argument, she managed to get out a decent amount of the speech she'd practiced for weeks in front of the mirror.

"I think I have a right to know what the place that kept me for so long was like," she'd pleaded.

She told him about how she wanted to see the parts beyond the room they'd kept her in - the places where they observed her, the places she'd been barred from. She told him that going to close the gate

hadn't been enough; that she wanted to face the nightmares of locked doors and silent screams head on, put them to rest once and for all. Hopper had shaken his head the whole time and El's heart sank, knowing then that it was a losing battle. Still, she tried to explain her plan: to go in at night, enter from the woods so no one would see. Besides, she'd whined, the place was closed down, the bad men gone. It would be fine.

But he'd simply looked at her, his eyes steely, serious, cold. "If you try to go there, so help me god, kid, I'll... do not go back there. Ever. Understand?"

She nodded, so upset by that point that she'd almost believed she'd keep the promise. But after a week of restless nights, of imagining how easy it'd be to slip out the window and through the woods to that shell of a building she wanted - no, needed - to conquer one last time, she decided to act.

Being found by her very protective adoptive father, however, hadn't been part of the plan. And now she sat in the passenger seat of the Blazer, anxiously awaiting a Hopper explosion of unprecedented proportions. So far, however, he was silent - which for some reason made El even more nervous. The air in the car felt suffocating and she rolled down the window, letting the warm summer breeze wash over her face. She closed her eyes, only to have them fly open a moment later when Hopper finally spoke.

"I think you already know how disappointed I am," he said, his tone measured. "And how - how badly this could've turned out, how stupid it was to - "

"No one saw me," El cut in, even though she knew it wouldn't make a difference. "No one was there."

It was quiet again for a while until they turned onto the road toward the cabin.

Hop glanced over at her. "There's a lot I want to say to you right now. But I think there's someone else who might be able to knock some sense into you."

El frowned in confusion, trying to read his expression. She followed his gaze ahead, and when the cabin came into view she gasped.

There, on the porch steps, awash in the glow of the headlights, was Mike.

"How did - "

"I thought you might be with him," Hopper replied. "So I called him on that - that thing you guys - "

"The Supercomm," El filled in, eyes still trained ahead.

Hopper parked the Blazer, shifting to look at her fully. "I couldn't lie to him, kid. He was too worried." He opened his door, motioning for El to do the same. "I think you'd better explain it to him yourself."

El watched him get out of the car before turning back to look at Mike. He was dressed in what looked like his pyjamas. She noticed his bike leaning against the porch railing. He stood up from his spot and was staring right back at El, tense, as though he were debating whether to rush over to her or not. She stayed there for a moment, unsure of the onslaught of emotion that hit her the instant she saw him.

She knew Hopper was angry and disappointed. Upsetting as it was, she could live with that. But Mike... she'd hurt him. Even from her vantage point, she could see that clearly. And hurting the person you love more than anything, the person you promised wouldn't lose you again... well, that was different.

Taking a breath, she willed herself to get out of the car. Hopper had already gone inside, and as El approached Mike she had to hold back from what she would usually do - run and fling herself into his arms.

"Hopper called me," Mike said, his eyes following El as she came up the steps and stood next to him.

"I know."

They turned to face each other. Mike's jaw was set in anger, but the sadness in his dark eyes was unmistakable. Looking at him made El

feel like she'd gotten the wind knocked out of her - and knowing she was the one who caused the pain written all over his face made it even worse.

"Mike, I - "

"How could you?" he blurted. "How could you think - you could have warned me, El, you shouldn't have - "

"Mike, I didn't want you to - "

"Didn't want me to what? Stop you? Stop you from doing something so - so dangerous, so incredibly..." he trailed off, his frustration rendering him speechless. He began to pace a little, his hands balled into fists at his sides.

El stayed still, almost afraid of what would happen if she tried to say something. She knew he'd be upset, but she hadn't expected him to get as angry with her as he was. She'd only ever seen him like this once before - when they pulled what they thought was Will's body from the quarry.

But even still she couldn't resist the urge to touch him, to remind him that she was there, alive, unhurt. She stepped forward a little, her fingers brushing his forearm.

"Mike," she said quietly. She watched as he slowed his pacing. They were closer now and El traced down his arm toward his hand, carefully entwining her fingers in his. He didn't pull away. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

He turned to face her. "El, it's..." he began before stopping and shaking his head, like the words he was about to say didn't fit.

El watched as tears slipped down his cheeks and her breath caught in her throat, a knot twisting painfully in her stomach.

"You know," Mike began, wiping at his eyes quickly. "When you came back and I said I never gave up on you, I wasn't lying."

"I know you weren't, Mike, I would never think - "

"No, just - let me finish," he interrupted, sniffing away the quivering in his voice. He caught El's eyes. "I never even let myself think that you were dead." He paused at that, squeezing his eyes shut for a second, as though the very word had punched him in the gut. "Which means I never imagined my life, or Hawkins, or - or the whole world, without you in it. Never, not once," he said, his eyes blazing with intensity.

He pulled El toward him a little, moving their clasped hands up to rest over his heart. She could feel him trembling all over.

"And I still can't, El. That's all I could think about on the ride over here. That even if something happened in - in that place, that I still wouldn't be able to... I can't imagine this world without you."

It seemed like he wanted to say more but he looked spent, like he'd just shared a long-held secret and was afraid of the power the words held. And if that was the case then El felt the same. Because there were no words to describe the ache in her body, the excruciating truth that she'd hurt him in that way. She pictured him pedalling in the dark, frantic, not knowing if she was alive, and it made her nearly dizzy with sadness. She couldn't speak. So instead she curled herself in close to him, pressing her cheek against his, squeezing his hands as tight as she could.

Later, laying next to each other on the couch, she'd whisper everything to him.

About how she'd gone to see the room they used to lock her up in and, in an outburst of emotion, smashed the door apart with her powers. About the testing equipment and sound booths and the now-empty bath where she'd seen the Demogorgon for the first time. About how she cried as she left, feeling truly relieved for the first time in months.

But right then, she just wanted to listen to the rhythm of his breathing. To let him feel her heartbeat through their joined hands. To repeat the only words she could think of that made any sense, that would calm him, that would bring them back to each other.

*"I love you more than anything."*

## 12. Chapter 12

**Prompts: "Kiss me" & "Is this okay?"**

---

She was only a minute late, but Mike couldn't help but feel nervous as he glanced down at his watch again.

12:01.

"Twelve zero one," he muttered to himself. Ever since he'd taught El to read time like that, he sometimes did it too. It had become a reflex that reminded him of her, and it made him smile.

12:03 now - officially past midnight, the time El wanted them to meet. She'd explained that it was the same time two characters in one of her favourite soap operas met when they snuck out to see each other, and it was romantic.

That had made Mike blush, even if it was kind of true. Sneaking out to see his girlfriend on a summer night *was* a little romantic. But he was more than happy to oblige when El brought up the idea about a week ago and so there he was, waiting for her in the dark. Just as he was reaching for his Supercomm to radio and find out where she was, he heard the tall grass in front of him rustle. His ears pricked and he squinted, watching as El's form took shape in the moonlight.

"Hi," she whispered, jogging the last few steps to him. "Sorry, climbing out of Will's window was a little... difficult," she said, panting.

They'd planned this around Hopper's weekly overnight shift, during which El always stayed at the Byers' house - meaning it was both closer to Mike and easier to sneak out from. Much to Mike's embarrassment, El let Will in on the plan (he later had to swear him to secrecy, lest he be met with merciless teasing at the hands of Dustin and Lucas). They chose a spot that was halfway between the two houses; a clearing in a field where the Party had gone a few times that summer to build a fire and roast marshmallows.

"It's okay, I wasn't - " Mike began, but as usual was cut off as El flung herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. He laughed a little, hugging her back.

She pulled away after a minute and even in the dark Mike could see the glimmer of excitement in her eyes.

"So now what?"

Mike frowned. "Uh... what do you mean?"

"We snuck out to meet each other, at midnight, like we said," El intoned, as if the facts weren't obvious. "So now what do we do?"

Mike stifled a laugh, her genuine inquisitiveness both humorous and endearing. To be fair, they hadn't exactly talked about what the night would be after they met up. El had just been so excited about the prospect that Mike didn't think past that.

He looked around and then up at the sky, the answer becoming slowly evident. "Well... we could look at the stars," he said.

El smiled. "You mean stargazing?"

"You know about it?" he asked, taking off his hoodie and laying it on a worn-in patch of grass at their feet.

"Me and Hopper did it once, near the cabin," she said, crouching down with him. "It was Sarah's favourite thing to do."

Mike noticed how her tone dropped, somber at the mention of Hopper's late daughter. "Well, you can teach me then," he told her.

He sat and reached his hand out, tugging El down so she was situated between his legs, her back resting against his chest. He wrapped his arms over top of hers, and she moved their joint hands into the front pocket of the sweater she was wearing.

"Is this okay, if we sit like this?" Mike asked quietly in her ear.

She hummed contentedly in response, leaning her head all the way back so it rested against his collarbone. They were both quiet for a

while as they settled in, looking up at the inky black sky punctuated by an impressive array of bright stars. Hawkins might be small, Mike thought, but the lack of skyscrapers or densely packed suburbs made for a beautifully uninterrupted night sky.

El sighed, removing a hand from her sweater pocket and pointing lazily upwards. "I only know a few of them. Like the Big Dipper, and Little Dipper," she said, motioning to the two constellations. "And I think maybe that might be a planet..." she began, stretching her head back a little.

But Mike wasn't following her gaze. He was looking at her face, contorted in an adorable mix of concentration and awe. His heart swelled and he squeezed her tighter against him.

"Hey," he murmured in her ear, feeling her shiver.

She turned her head a little to look at him. "Yeah?"

Mike was grateful that the dark hid the flush he could feel in his cheeks. "Kiss me?" he whispered.

El smirked, and he knew she was thinking about last week, when she told him he didn't have to keep asking if he could kiss her. He promised to break the habit, but looking at her just then had made him a little forgetful.

She leaned in, brushing her lips against his before doing what he'd asked. It was a longer kiss than either of them were used to and Mike's heart pounded, his pulse jumping against his throat. Kissing El was always like this: exhilarating, able to bring him from zero to sixty at breakneck speed, but still somehow gentle and calming in a way that made him feel warm all over. When they finally parted, El rested her head back against him and he kissed her temple, leaving his lips there as she sighed happily.

"How long do we have?" she asked.

"Well," Mike replied, "Depends on how tired you want to be tomorrow."

El laughed, waving her hand in an air of nonchalance. "I don't care



about being tired."

Unable to help himself, Mike traced kisses down her cheek, his heart lurching again as he got closer to her mouth. "Me neither," he muttered.

"So as long as we want, then?"

Using his arm, Mike nudged her head to the side, overcome by the desire to kiss her again.

"Yep," he said as she met his eyes. "As long as we want."